DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 386 CS 206 107

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TITLE The Vigorous Pursuit of Grace and Style.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (50th, Atlanta, GA, November 6-8, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction: Higher Education: High Schools: Language Rhythm: Language Styles: *Literary Styles: Prose: *Teaching Methods: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction: Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Stylistics

ABSTRACT

Grace and style are elements of composition rarely demanded by teachers or developed by students. Since both terms are elusive to define and because asking students to make attempts at grace and style can have unappealing results, perhaps vigor is a better element to encourage students to pursue. Vigor does not outlaw graceful flourishes and stylistic turns as long as they serve a purpose. Vigor does outlaw the distraction of frills. Vigor is grace uncluttered, style undisguised. Reading aloud for rhythm and resonance is one way teachers can attune students to vigorous prose. Another is to teach them the oral stress points in a sentence. Teachers can also emphasize parallel constructions and how they help guide reader expectations. Experimenting with sentences by changing diction, deleting or transforming various elements, recombining "kernel" sentences, and imitating an original sentence will give students a sense of the different effects of the same sentence constructed in various ways. Finally, if style is choice among optional words and structures, students should not be constrained by blanket composition rules. Grace and style are not elements that can be taught as such, but these suggestions may help students begin to acquire them. (HTH)

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7 November 1981

THE VIGOROUS PURSUIT OF GRACE AND STYLE

Grace and style too often remain the elusive will-o'-the-wisps of composition instructors, especially those who teach the practical-minded students in two-year colleges. If our students give us sensible papers, they feel satisfied. Grace and style come as unexpected blessings, rarely bestowed by students and rarely demanded by instructors.

But have we the right to demand grace and style? Not unless we teach them. Then, are they teachable? Not unless we first agree on what we mean by grace and style. Both terms defy consensus.

Perhaps the harder to pin down is grace. Alexander Pope praised the bold poet who dares to "snatch a grace beyond the reach of art." For Pope, grace exceeds the boundary of rules. Perhaps, then, grace--the light touch, the happy phrase, the subdued sparkle--may well be indefinable and fortuitous and, hence, unteachable.

If grace is elusive because it can't be defined, style is elusive because of too many definitions. Is style the garb of thought, the icing on the hard cake of ideas? Is style the man? Is style the fusion of form and content? Is style a deviation from the norm? Each of these views has its

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advocates and its philosophical rationale. I stipulate that style is separate from meaning, that it is the external and changeable dress of ideas "oft thought, but ne'er so well expressed." As has been argued elsewhere, this seems to be the only view of style that permits helpful suggestions and intelligent revisions in a composition class.[1]

Let me be more precise about this dress in which we clothe our thoughts. For purposes of this discussion, I define style as the sum of all the linguistic and rhetorical choices that a writer makes, all the options in picking words, sentence structures, arrangement of parts, tone, and attitude towards the audience and the material. Wherever a writing decision can be made, style results--for better or for worse. Notice that with this definition, style loses much of its merely decorative air. A writer can decide to be elegant and poetic, an option that will affect the style. A writer can decide to be blunt and plain-spoken; this option, too, affects the style. Or a writer may be unaware of style, but his unconsidered, slap-dash options still result in a recognizable style. So the dress of style <u>can</u> be ruffles and frills. But style can also be utilitarian bluejeans--or rags.

I make this point because, much as I cherish grace and style, I am a trifle leery of using the words in a composition class. They sound a bit belletristic and might turn off many career-minded students as too frivolous and impractical. What's more, if we do ask for grace and style, we may well regret it.

Nothing is less appealing than the precious prose and purple patches that can result from amateurish aspirations to style.

Perhaps vigor is a better term. Vigor fights against the lumpish, elephantine ploddiness of much writing today--and not only student writing. Vigorous prose is prose stripped for action, where each word pulls its weight and does its job. Vigor does not outlaw graceful flourishes and stylistic turns--if the flourishes and turns serve a purpose. Both the boxer and the ballerina combine strength with grace, vigor with style. Vigor does outlaw the distraction of extraneous frills, the wasted motion of strained modifiers, the irritation of "clever" phrases. Vigor is grace uncluttered, style undisguised.

So, having suggested that vigor is the grace and style that we want our students to pursue, how can we help them in that pursuit?

For one thing, we might rediscover the lost art of reading aloud. With the modern emphasis on speed-reading, with the demise of memorized poems and declamatory recitations, students no longer know what good writing sounds like. Perhaps the composition instructor could each day read aloud a short passage by a prose master, ranging from Addison and Johnson to Loren Eiseley and Lewis Thomas, just to let students attune their ears to the rhythm and resonance of vigorous prose. But stay away from such idiosyncratic masters as James and Faulkner. Their rhythms are too rich for freshman digestion.

Speaking of rhythm, try pointing out some common rhythms

of prose, the iambs and the dactyls that, while not patterned as in poetry, nonetheless add to the pace and lilt of good sentences. Spend a few minutes on home-grown iambic pentameter, the cadence chosen for blank verse because it so closely echoes the swing of normal speech. Start the class off with some familiar lines: Take off your coat and make yourself at home. Put out the lights before you go to bed. Then ask them for single lines. With luck you'll get: I saw the moon behind the clouds last night. I wish this class would hurry up and end. Don't worry that this exercise will produce a theme written in blank verse. It won't. But it may make the students a shade more allergic to the cloddish cacophony of much academic and bureaucratic writing: dum-de-de-de-dum-dum-de-clunk-clunk.

Teach them the stress spots in a sentence--the beginning, the end, and (with lesser stress) on either side of internal punctuation. Knowing these stress spots, students may be less likely to bury a sentence's point in its mushy middle or to let sentences sputter out in weak whimpers.

Among individual words, nouns and adverbs seem to get the most oral stress, followed by adjectives. Verbs, despite their grammatical importance, often receive little more stress than prepositions or articles. Therefore, although a precise verb is always preferable for transmitting precise ideas, a strong, active, colorful verb may add to the meaning, but really doesn't add all that much to vigorous rhythms.

Emphasize parallel constructions for the rhythm, strength,

and resonance of repeated patterns that parallelism sets up. Show how parallelism helps to guide reader expectations. Explain the need to establish correct expectations, so that readers can intelligently share in the work of communication. Explain the need to fulfill these expectations promptly and fully, so that readers feel neither cheated nor misled. And explain the useful shock value of a word that occasionally and unexpectedly distorts the anticipated fulfillment, like Pope's fear lest Belinda "stain her honour or her new brocade."

You might demonstrate these ideas by experimenting with a different laboratory-specimen sentence every class period. Begin with published sentences that are good, but not necessarily great, and try to see what makes them good. Later choose slightly weak published sentences to show how even real authors might be improved upon. Still later, use sentences, both good and weak, from your students' papers. Five minutes a day on such experiments are all you need to spend.

You can do at least six different things with these sentences. You can change the diction, delete various elements, transpose the elements, transform the elements, decompose the sentence into simpler sentences and then recombine these "kernels," and, finally, imitate the original sentence. I shall use one specimen on which I'll ring all six changes. You would use a different sentence each day, you'd do only one experiment on a given day, and you'd choose whatever experiment works best with that day's sentence. Let the students

suggest the changes, and let the students intuit the effects of those changes on the grace and style and vigor of the original.

The sentence that I have chosen for my experimenting comes from Lewis Thomas's essay, "On Natural Death."[2] For ease in comparison, I shall repeat the original sentence as I discuss each of the six experimental variations.

1. Change in diction.

   Original: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of an amiable household cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

   Changed: The death of a field mouse, in the jaws of a friendly pet cat, is a sight I have seen often.

In this instance, I have used synonyms for some of the original words. Note the difference between death and dying; perhaps these aren't true synonyms--a point that might well elicit discussion. Note the loss of irony in changing amiable to friendly. Note the loss of mock-epic grandiloquence in changing spectacle and beheld to sight and seen--or is Thomas mocking? Is the death of a field mouse in fact worthy of the somber tragedy evoked by his heightened diction? To back up a bit, note the significant difference between at the jaws (which Thomas wrote) and the more normal in the jaws. At suggests a formal execution: He died at the hands of the firing squad. Is this mock-epic again, or one more genuine

tragic touch? Finally, contrast the dwindling fall of <u>often</u> with the emphatic stress of <u>many times</u>.

2. <u>Deletion of elements</u>.

<u>Original</u>: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of an amiable household cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

<u>Changed</u>: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of a cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

Often you can delete large structures like prepositional phrases or adverbial clauses without losing the meaningful core of the sentence. In this particular specimen, all I could delete were the two modifiers of <u>cat</u>, <u>amiable</u> and <u>household</u>. The difference is evident, though, in the imagery, in the loss of ironic tone, and in the unwanted gain of a mechanical rhythm: <u>ăt thĕ jáws</u> / <u>ŏf ă cát</u>--a rhythm that almost enforces an anapestic trot through the rest of the sentence: <u>ăt thĕ jáws</u> / <u>ŏf ă cát</u> / <u>ĭs ă spéc-</u> / <u>tăclĕ Í</u> / <u>hăvĕ bĕhéld</u> / <u>mănў tímes</u>.

3. <u>Transposition of elements</u>.

<u>Original</u>: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of an amiable household cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

<u>Changed</u>: A spectacle I have beheld many times is the dying of a field mouse at the jaws of an amiable household cat.

When elements are rearranged, as in this third experiment, you can easily see the effect of word position, stress, and punctuation upon the impact of a sentence. The front and back stress spots contain a spectacle and cat, relatively unimportant words. Meanwhile, with the repositioning and the loss of internal commas, the poor field mouse dies obscurely in the unstressed middle of the sentence.

4. Transformation of elements.

Original: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of an amiable household cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

Changed: I have many times beheld the spectacle of a field mouse dying in an amiable household cat's jaws.

The fourth experiment involves transforming various grammatical structures. Notice my improvements. For one thing, I've gotten rid of Thomas's weak main verb ("the dying is a spectacle") and his circuitous relative clause ("a spectacle [that] I have beheld many times"). Instead, I've used a stronger, straight-forward transitive-verb construction: "I have many times beheld the spectacle . . . ." I've also changed the slightly awkward gerund, the dying of a field mouse, to the easier participial modifier, a field mouse dying. And I've eliminated the wordy jaws of a cat in favor of a cat's jaws. All in all, I've ironed out the syntax, chopped out four chunks of dead wood, and reduced the sentence from twenty-two words

to eighteen. Isn't my version better than his, more direct, more concise, more vigorous? It isn't? This might stand as a warning to us teachers to watch our red ink.

5. Decomposition to underlying sentences.

Original: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of an amiable household cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

Changed: The dying of a field mouse is a spectacle.
The field mouse dies at the jaws of a cat.
The cat is amiable.
The cat belongs to a household.
I have beheld the spectacle many times.

This fifth experiment dissects the original sentence into shorter kernel sentences. You might have the class find these underlying sentences. Or you might decompose the sentence ahead of time, and then give them the chunks to re-combine, having them compare their combinations with each other's and, later, with the author's.

6. Imitation.

Original: The dying of a field mouse, at the jaws of an amiable household cat, is a spectacle I have beheld many times.

Changed: The assassination of a great man, at the hands of a demented fellow citizen, is a tragedy we have witnessed too often.

Changed: The blossoming of the cherry trees, along the borders of the Washington tidal basin, is an extravaganza the nation has applauded every spring.

This final experiment imitates the original sentence, hewing to the grammatical skeleton, but plugging in new content words. Here I have tried two imitations. The first is clearly influenced by the content and, to some extent, the tone of the original. The second shows that the same skeleton can lend itself to quite different meaning and effect.

I've offered a handful of specific suggestions to encourage an awareness of grace and style and vigor in your students. Let me now philosophize a bit. Try to steer clear of blanket rules in the area of style, especially blanket prohibitions: use no expletives; avoid the passive voice; don't write fragments; stay away from forms of to be; chop out dead wood. As we saw in my "improvement" of Thomas's sentence, these injunctions aren't always fruitful. Besides, they constrain the students by limiting their freedom of choice. If style is choice among optional words and structures, the students need as wide a choice as possible.

So instead of restrictions, we should give our students credit (probably undeserved) for having written what they write deliberately, as the result of considered choice. We can then ask, "Why have you chosen an expletive, a passive, a fragment? What effect are you trying to impart? What effect would another choice have on your writing?" Make your students

justify any choices that you feel are questionable. Who knows? They might be right.

Now, if you use these ideas in your composition classes, will you be able to teach your students to write with grace and style and vigor? No. Frankly, I believe we can't teach these cherished but elusive qualities, no matter how many tricks we have in our bags. But we can work, with these ideas and others, to increase our students' sensitivity to words and rhythms. We can enlarge their repertoires of grammatical and stylistic options. We can enhance their appreciation of subtle grace, apt style, clean vigor. Then perhaps--just possibly--grace and style and vigor might, like cheerfulness, start breaking in.

* * *

NOTES

[1]For further discussions of this position, see Louis T. Milic, "Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition," College Composition and Communication, May 1965, and Jane R. Walpole, "Style as Option," CCC, May 1980, pp. 205-212.

[2]The Medusa and the Snail (New York: Viking Press, 1979), p. 103.